BIOGRAPHY

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CHARLES ADAMS

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IN the summer of 1924, a group of doctors gathered at a dinner in the Army and Navy Club of Chicago, with the object of formulating a memorial to their friend and teacher, Charles Adams, the source of much inspiration, to them especially as regards the finer things in the practice of surgery. After some discussion it was found that each of those assembled had been touched in a personal and intimate manner by his contact with Dr. Adams and so it was decided that each should write a letter telling what he felt Charles Adams had done for him in shaping his career. The opinions varied greatly and showed in how many ways Dr. Adams with his great fund of knowledge and experience had helped his students. This incident does much to show the character of the subject of this sketch.

Charles Adams was born in the village of Flore, Northamptonshire, England, May 29, 1847, the county that gave to America the families of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, William Penn, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Charles had three brothers and one sister. His father, John Adams, was a rugged English farmer and stockman. His mother had been a teacher in a private school and was a woman of superior education. It is interesting to note that the father furnished the physical stamina, industry, and keen knowledge of men, while the mother brought culture and desire for study.

When Charles was 9 years old, his family came to America and settled in Milwaukee and from there moved to Chicago, where the father continued to deal in cattle and later helped to found the stockyards. At the age of 17 years, young Charles began work in his father's office, but he continued his studies. He also found work under Dr. Stimson at the Chicago Academy of Science whenever he was free from his duties at his father's office. I believe that it was here that he gained the impetus that later made him a fellow of the Royal Microscopical Society of England, and in his medical career a careful student of pathology. It is a well known fact that the microscope became a close companion in his declining years at Honolulu.

Dr. Adams graduated from Hahnemann Medical College, Chicago, in 1872, he served a year in the hospital, and then set out for the medical centers of London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Paris—goals of young surgeons of ambition of his

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day. A young scientist is fortunate if he falls under the spell of great leaders in his profession, and Dr. Adams was particularly fortunate in this respect. In later years he told his students many anecdotes regarding the great teachers of Europe.

Dr. Adams returned to Chicago to take up general practice and at this time he married Mary, the daughter of Thomas S. Curtis, of Wellingborough, England. They had one son, Cuthburt, and a daughter, Ethel. Mrs. Adams died in 1888. In 1889 Dr. Adams married Mrs. Elizabeth Gaylord, widow of Henry Gaylord and daughter of W. H. Mitchell. From 1874 to 1875 he was professor of surgical pathology in Hahnemann Medical College; from 1875 to 1884, professor of the principles and practices of surgery in Chicago Homeopathic Medical College. In 1896 he gave up general practice and devoted himself exclusively to surgery.

Dr. Adams was one of Chicago's pioneers in the study of pathology. Even in the eighties he maintained his own laboratory and later employed from one to two technicians to run through for his microscope every tissue that came from his operating table.

In 1898 he received the degree of M.D. (*ad eundem gradum*) from Rush Medical College. He was consulting surgeon to the Chicago Nursing and Half Orphan Asylum, the Evanston hospital, Streeter Hospital, St. Joseph's Hospital, and for over 25 years surgeon to the Cook County Hospital.

He was a member and past president of the American Association of Military Surgeons, fellow of the Royal Microscopical Society of England, fellow of the American College of Surgeons, the Chicago Surgical Society, the American Medical Association, the Illinois Medical Society, and the Chicago Medical Society.

He was an omnivorous reader and accumulated a large library both of medical and general. In addition to the standard editions he was always on the lookout for rare and ancient medical books. He had a reading acquaintance with six languages and read the journals in each. In the early days of Chicago, transportation was slow and much time was lost in going about from hospital to hospital. Adams always carried a canvas leather bound bag that held a few of his latest medical magazines and read as he rode or waited for a bridge at the river. Until I came under the influence of Osler I thought him the best read medical man in general literature I had known. To have him join the family circle and read to us from the classics or some modern writer was a treat.

Adams succeeded Nicholas Senn as surgeon general of Illinois. An unusual friendship had sprung up between these men which probably was little known among their associates. Both had brilliant minds and common interests—general and military surgery. They served together in the Spanish War. Both had been presidents of the Association of Military Surgeons. Senn had a dramatic personality and an enormous capacity for work. Adams was quiet and unobtrusive. Each carried on experiments in surgery and there was a constant exchange of

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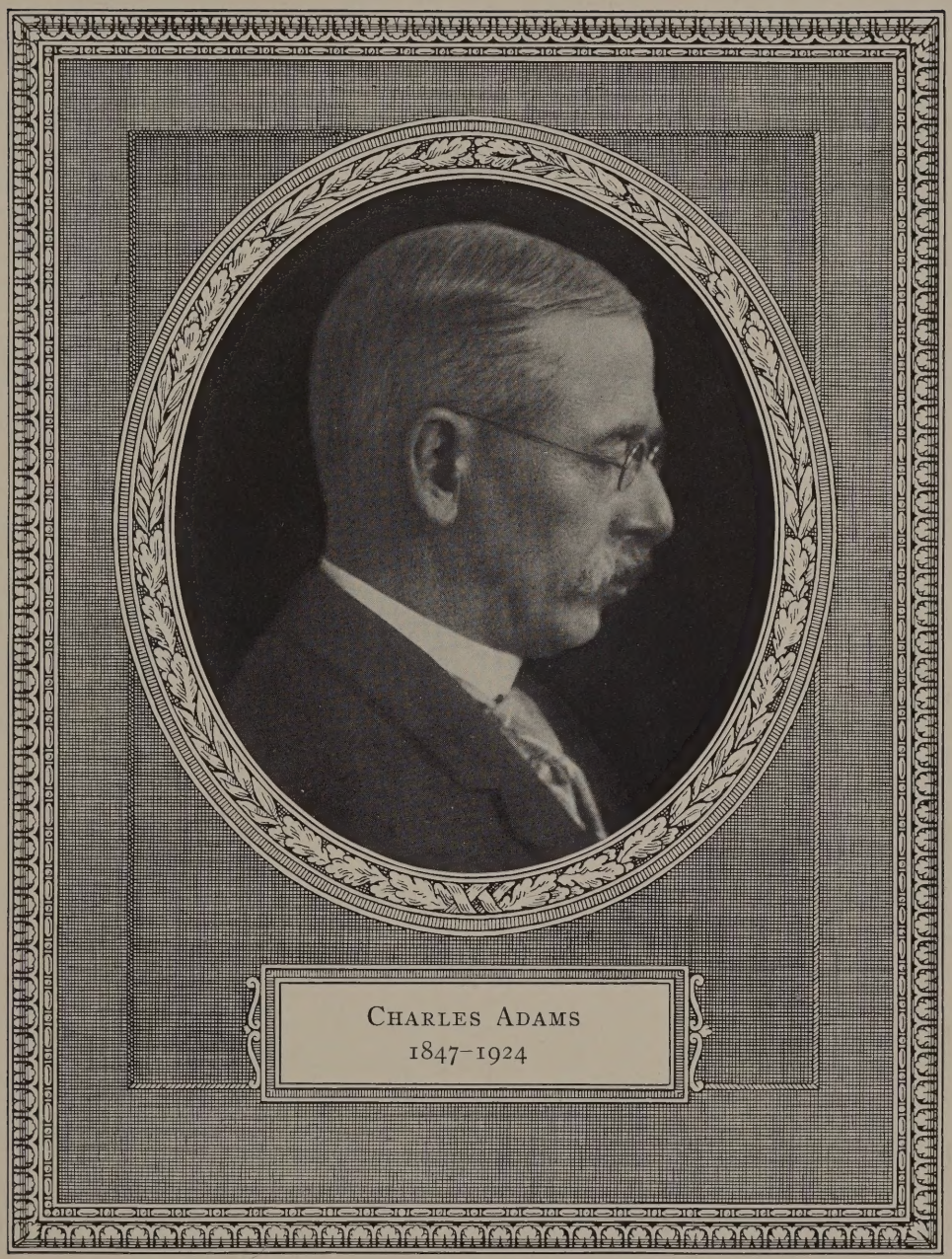

Charles Adams
1847–1924

opinions and experience between them. Senn's notable contribution was bone healing. Adams carried on a series of experiments both before and after the Spanish War on gunshot wounds of the abdomen. In his home for many years on a high bluff on the shores of lake Michigan, north of Chicago, he carried out these investigations. With all the military rifles that he could obtain he worked out the results of bullets of different trajectory, velocity and density, using dogs as experimental material, striking their abdomens at all possible angles.

Watching him in the operating room, one was amazed at his dexterity, but this came from constant practice in and out of the hospital in tying knots and in the manipulation of clamps and instruments. In the nineties a general surgeon was expected to do a cataract operation and a laparotomy on the same day and highly trained hands were necessary to be successful.

Adams edited Senn's *Principles of Surgery*, wrote notable papers on gunshot wounds and general surgery, and reviewed the surgical literature of his day. His avocation was the collection of cartoons and rare books. Of the two, the former seemed the most absorbing. Through agents he gathered cartoons from every country where cartoons were published. His collection he carefully classified over a period of years and presented to one of Chicago's public libraries.

When War was declared he was past 70 but he offered his services and was accepted.

His declining years were spent in Honolulu in his beautiful Japanese home overlooking the sea. Here with his books and microscope he classified the flies on the island and studied the deep sea crustacea.

An analysis of Charles Adams' character shows an abhorence of ostentation, a dislike of publicity, but deep friendship for those near him, and an idealism which characterized his whole professional life.

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